

The moments of your life

Journaling is a way to record, reflect and understand

I WAS TAUGHT EARLY in life the importance of words in action. My mother, proud of my graduation from elementary school, presented me with a beautiful book of blank pages. On the inside cover she wrote, "Write all of your thoughts and wishes here. Love, Mom." I began with diary entries, detailing every minute of my daily life.

In those younger years, the events were less important than the feeling that arose as I was writing. It seemed to be a feeling of euphoric release—in essence, a book of personal short stories. Each volume of my diary detailed my friendships with my peers, my relationship (or lack thereof) with my parents, family trips we took, crushes I had in school, and the struggles I dealt with throughout the growing period.

The pages became a documentary of my world. The words became a way for me to look back at the mistakes I'd made and the achievements I had accomplished.

In the 11 diaries that followed that first gift, I honed my writing skills, focusing more on telling a story rather than just providing an account of my daily activities. It let me look back at my world and understand what it was I was trying to fulfill, what I needed to achieve my goals, and what I perceived to be standing in my way. Writing down all of the thoughts floating through my head allowed me to sort them out. The pages let me voice all of those things I wanted to say, or wish I had said, to others. I began writing during class, after tests, as the teacher talked, during lunch, any chance I got. Not only was it a chance to sort out my thoughts, it gave me the ability to escape the mundane.

As I grew up, I had the chance to visit other countries via choir trips, study abroad and go on family vacations. Through my dedicated journaling, I have pages of each experience documented in my own words, rather than just a pile of postcards or souvenirs. At times when I exper-

rienced truly great moments, I had my trusty pen and paper nearby, able to describe the details of the water tugging on the passenger ship as we floated through the Great Barrier Reef, or watching the children run in circles around the gardens at Tivoli or the green grasses of Kuala Lumpur. I am able to relive each and every journey through my words.

When I moved to Seattle, writing became the



A journal can construct an "autobiography" of great and small moments alike.

closest friend I had. Straight out of college I was offered a job with an Internet start-up—a dime a dozen back then. I jumped at the chance. Great benefits, new city, good salary. The only problem was that it meant moving 3,200 miles from everyone I had ever known to a city I had never visited.

For the first year, I lived south of the city and took the bus to work every day. There, on my daily commute, I was fascinated by my new surroundings. Interesting people, beautiful new buildings, a huge city—I was mystified. It was also the place where my writing really took off.

I would describe in great detail every moment I experienced, from waking to sleeping, jotting my notes down on scraps of paper, e-mails to myself, a small notebook I carried in my purse. I would scribble at the bus stop, in the coffee shop, at my desk when the boss wasn't looking. A note

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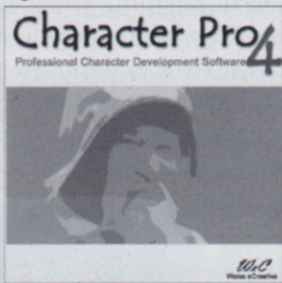
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[OFF THE CUFF]

might describe the woman next to me on the bus, mumbling to herself. Or getting lost on my first driving trip downtown. Or my first attempts to use public transportation to get to appointments.

I focused on writing about every aspect of a situation, both to build on my composition skills and to remember my journeys. At night, when I returned to my apartment alone, I would write pages upon pages in my journal. To me, it was a whole new world, and I didn't want to forget the smallest detail. Not only were my words a close friend to me during those years, they also gave me a chance to reflect on how far I'd come since then—my first great adventure into the adult world.

My notes, my random thoughts and words, became fodder for each one of my short stories (and also helped with my personal essays and creative nonfiction). They provided details to characters, places and experiences.

As I move into a new phase of life—engagement, wedding, house, kids—I will keep my journal near me, as I have during the first years of my relationship with my partner, Jeff. Years from now, I want to remember how I felt the night we met, the first time he told me he loved me, and the flutter of my stomach as I walked down the aisle on the way to my future.

I want to be able to share these moments with my children, as my parents have shared with me. These recorded details will protect the incredible moments in my life as my memory fades. To build an autobiography of my life, in great detail: Now that's worth writing. #

Jennifer Matthewson of Portland, Ore., is a freelance writer and entrepreneur. She contributes to the zine *Uncapped* and is author of the upcoming *A Graduate's Guide to the Real World*.